Horse Racing Was Once the Main Attraction at the Fairbury Fair

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For more than a century, thousands of Fairbury Fair visitors crowded around the racetrack to watch powerful horses thunder down the homestretch while drivers urged them toward the finish line. Long before carnival rides and automobile races became fair attractions, horse racing was the undisputed star of the Fairbury Fair. Even today, many older Fairbury residents who remember those races recall them with great nostalgia and wish they were still part of the fair.

The Fairbury Fair began in 1876 during a time when agriculture was the dominant industry in Livingston County. County fairs across Illinois were originally organized to promote improved livestock breeding and better farming practices. Farmers brought their best cattle, hogs, horses, and crops to exhibit and compete for prizes.

Horses were especially important to farmers in the late nineteenth century. Before the widespread use of tractors and automobiles, horses provided much of the power used on farms and for transportation. As a result, horse competitions quickly became one of the most popular events at agricultural fairs.

Horse racing soon became a major attraction at the Fairbury Fair. Crowds of spectators gathered along the racetrack to watch the races and cheer for their favorite horses and drivers. These races provided excitement and entertainment for fairgoers and often drew large audiences.

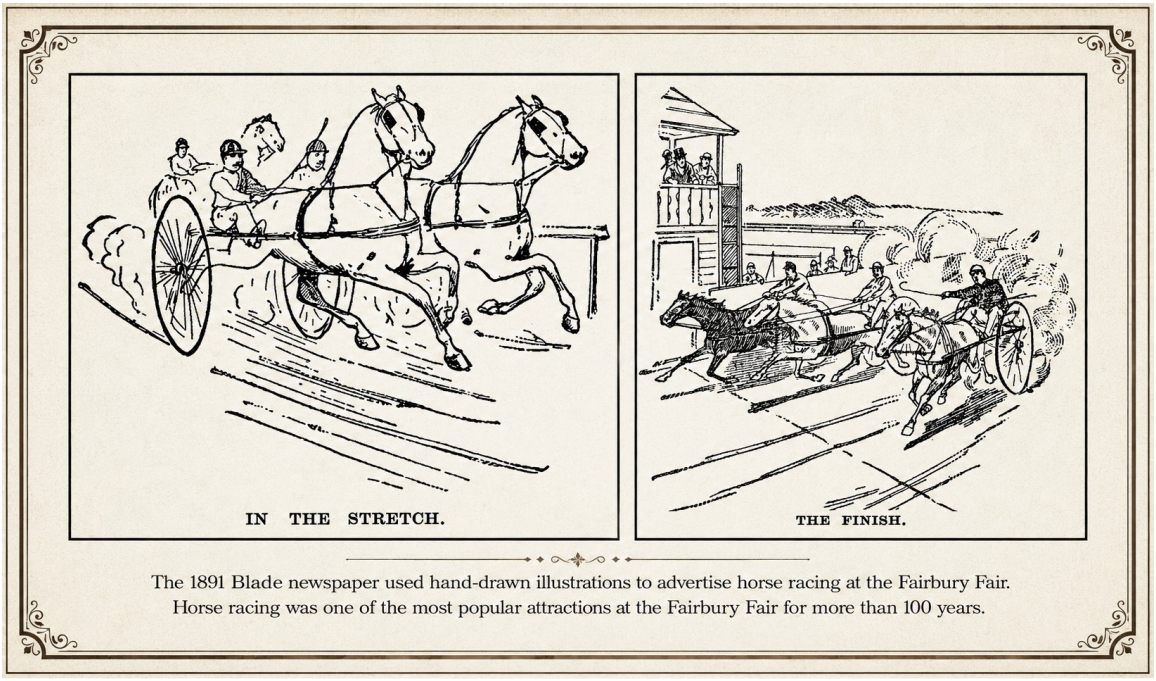
Two different types of horse racing were commonly held at county fairs such as the Fairbury Fair. One type involved a rider sitting directly on the horse. This style of racing is known as thoroughbred racing, and the rider is called a jockey. The horses race at a fast gallop while the jockey rides on the horse's back.

However, the most common type of racing at Midwest county fairs was harness racing. In this form of racing, the horse pulls a small two-wheeled cart known as a sulky**.** The driver sits in the sulky and controls the horse using reins. Instead of galloping, these horses race at a trot or pace, which are two different controlled running gaits used in harness racing.

Harness racing was particularly popular at county fairs because many farm horses were trained to trot or pace while pulling wagons or equipment. Farmers often took great pride in owning fast trotting or pacing horses, and fairs provided an opportunity to demonstrate their speed and skill.

During the early years of the Fairbury Fair, horse races were usually held on a dirt track located at the fairgrounds. Spectators gathered around the track or watched from the

grandstand as the races were run. The races were often organized into different classes based on the speed of the horses.



The 1891 Blade newspaper used hand-drawn illustrations to advertise horse racing at the Fairbury Fair. Horse racing was one of the most popular attractions at the Fairbury Fair for more than 100 years.

Prize money, sometimes called a purse, was awarded to the winning horses and their drivers. While the amounts were usually modest, the competition was often intense. Owners and drivers were eager to prove that their horses were the fastest in the region.

The races also brought visitors from surrounding communities. Farmers, horse owners, and spectators traveled to Fairbury from many neighboring towns to attend the fair and watch the races. On a good day, the racetrack could be surrounded by hundreds or even thousands of spectators.

Newspaper advertisements in the Fairbury Blade often promoted the horse races as one of the main attractions of the fair. The races were typically scheduled over several days so that visitors could attend multiple events during the fair week.

For many fairgoers, the horse races were the highlight of the entire fair. Families gathered along the rail of the racetrack to watch the horses thunder past. Children watched with excitement as the drivers urged their horses forward in the final stretch of the race.

As the twentieth century progressed, however, new forms of entertainment began to appear at county fairs. Automobile racing gradually became popular as cars replaced horses as the primary form of transportation. Stock car races and midget races began drawing large crowds to fairgrounds across the country.

At the same time, carnival rides, grandstand shows, and other forms of entertainment became more common. These new forms of entertainment gradually began to replace horse racing as the main attraction at many county fairs.

Eventually, horse racing at the Fairbury Fair came to an end. After approximately 130 years, horse racing ended in 2006.

For many residents who grew up attending the fair during those years, the horse races remain one of their strongest memories of the event. Older Fairbury residents often recall the excitement of watching the races and hearing the crowd's cheers as the horses approached the finish line.

Horse racing at county fairs was more than just a sporting event. It was also a reflection of the agricultural life that shaped communities like Fairbury. Horses were essential to farming and transportation, and the races celebrated the speed, strength, and value of these animals.

Today, the Fairbury Fair continues to provide entertainment and activities for visitors from across the region. Although horse racing is no longer part of the fair, the memories of those races remain an important part of the fair's long history.

For those who remember the racetrack and the excitement of the races, the Fairbury Fair will always include the image of horses pulling their sulkies down the dirt track while spectators watched from the grandstand. Those races were once the main attraction at the fair and helped create many lasting memories for generations of Fairbury residents.